

# Correspondence

## Swift visas for post-Brexit science

As the UK government's chief scientific adviser, I welcome the announcement of a new fast-track immigration scheme for researchers to help ensure that the United Kingdom remains a top destination for scientific talent after it leaves the European Union later this year. The scheme – which is being incorporated within a reformed and rebranded Global Talent Route – will go live on 20 February.

The fast-track scheme applies to all eligible overseas researchers and their team members who receive peer-reviewed grants from recognized funding bodies. The national funding agency, UK Research and Innovation, will oversee the eligibility of funding bodies and establish a new criterion for automatic endorsement. Dependents will continue to have full access to the labour market. There will also be an accelerated path to settlement. There is no cap on the number of researchers who can benefit.

The scheme will allow UK-based researchers to recruit overseas talent to their teams. Attracting the best international scientists at all career stages is an important part of the government's strategy to boost research and development. This first phase of changes goes a long way towards ensuring that the United Kingdom remains a global leader in science excellence.

**Patrick Vallance** Government Office for Science, London, UK. [contact@go-science.gov.uk](mailto:contact@go-science.gov.uk)

## Crop revolutions must reach poor

As researchers who recognize that plant science underpins food security, we applaud the development of genetic strategies that could sustainably improve crop yields (J. Bailey-Serres *et al. Nature* 575, 109–118; 2019). However, the socio-economic implications of such technologies could prevent farmers and consumers from adopting them, particularly in developing countries hit hardest by climate change.

Commercial interests typically drive the implementation of crop technologies. Advances in crop science are more about integrating technology with global economic realities, which can include poverty, poor governance, lack of market access and inefficient supply chains (A. A. Adenle *et al. Nature Biotechnol.* 36, 137–139; 2018).

Taking such limitations into account, along with public unease about genetic modification and the use of the gene-editing tool CRISPR in food production (J. L. Lusk *et al. Food Pol.* 78, 81–90; 2018), we consider that a broader range of technologies should be explored in parallel. Innovative approaches to plant breeding strategies, for example, could deliver a new green revolution.

**Christine H. Foyer\*** University of Birmingham, UK. [c.h.foyer@bham.ac.uk](mailto:c.h.foyer@bham.ac.uk)  
\*On behalf of 5 correspondents; see [go.nature.com/38hcjiv](https://go.nature.com/38hcjiv).

## Research funding gloom for Catalexit

I disagree with Joan Martínez Alier's view that Catalonia's research funding could increase if the region were to become independent of Spain (*Nature* 576, 384; 2019). For a start, Catalonia would lose out on future European research grants because it would cease to be a member of the European Union. And, contrary to Alier's suggestion, discontinuing fiscal transfers to Spain would make little difference in its landscape of bulging public debt, departing businesses, and no access to European Central Bank financing.

Madrid has a comparable weight in Spain's economy. Although fiscal transfers from Madrid to the rest of Spain are much higher than those from Catalonia, its absolute and per capita public debt are less than half those of Catalonia. Since 2012, Catalonia has drawn more than €70 billion (US\$78 billion) in favourable-term loans from Spanish public sources such as the Regional Liquidity Fund. To make matters worse, an independent Catalonia might need to add its share of Spanish public debt – around another €200 billion – to its regional debt (see [go.nature.com/37kqc1c](https://go.nature.com/37kqc1c)).

**José M. Rojo** Margarita Salas Biological Research Center, CSIC Madrid, Spain. [jmrojo@cib.csic.es](mailto:jmrojo@cib.csic.es)

## Genentech not first biotech company

In his illuminating history of corporate research, Paul Lucier repeats the common mistake of calling Genentech the first biotechnology firm (*Nature* 574, 481–485; 2019). Cetus was founded five years earlier, in 1971, by Nobel-prizewinner Donald Glaser and others. It initially developed microbial processes for producing chemical feedstocks, including propylene oxide and antibiotic intermediates. The corporation later pivoted to therapeutics.

Genentech was backed by venture capital. Cetus was funded largely by other means, including support from Standard Oil. Consequently, Cetus and a few other early biotech companies – Irvine Scientific, Gamma Biologicals and Cell Associates among them – have been overlooked or long forgotten because of a history that equates biotech with venture-capital-funded drug discovery.

**William Bains** Five Alarm Bio, Cambridge, UK. [william@fivealarmbio.com](mailto:william@fivealarmbio.com)

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